5.12
PAHARPUR

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The archaeological remains of Somapura Mahāvihāra; one of the famous Buddhist monasteries of Early Medieval period, is situated in the village of Paharpur (25˚1´51.48´´N and 88˚58´37.03´´E) of Badalgachi upazila under Naogaon District (Fig. 1) in northwest Bangladesh, 5 km west of Jamalganj Railway Station, 14 km south of Jaypurhat, and 34 km north of Naogaon town. This monastery has been referred to in various texts and inscriptions from South Asia and Tibet as one of the most sacred places of Buddhism in the Eastern part

Fig. 1: Locations of Somapura Mahāvihāra and other archeological sites around (Source: Sen et al. 2014).

of India during the rise of Tantric Buddhism. In spite of the fact that the second Pāla king Dharmapāla is credited with the construction of the *mahāvihāra*[1] which is currently visible as a conserved structure, recent excavations suggest that the

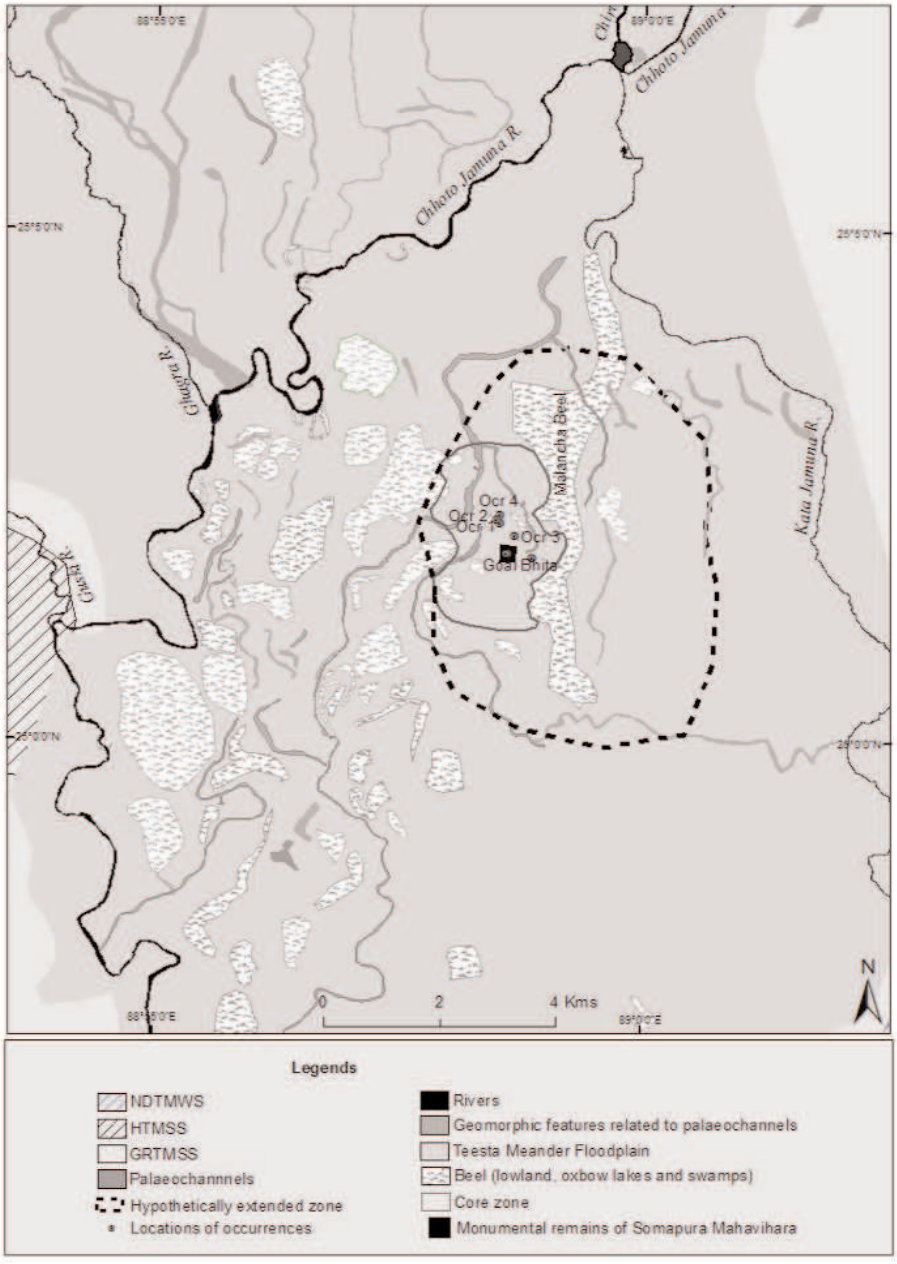


Fig. 2: Provisional extent of the settlements around Somapura Mahāvihāra (Source: Sen et al. 2014).

visible monumental remains were constructed upon earlier remains. They also suggest that the monumental remains are situated on a dynamic alluvial plain in a flood zone. The earlier remains cannot be precisely identified as a Jain vihāra mentioned in the Paharpur copper plate inscription found during the excavation and deciphered by K.N. Dikshit.

Somapura Mahāvihāra and associated remains are one of the most heavily researched and profusely represented archaeological remains in Bangladesh. This monastery is referred to as one of the most important centres of Buddhism in this part along with Vikramaśila, Nalanda, Jagaddala and Odantapuri. The remains were enlisted as a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1985. After excavations, the remains have been addressed from archaeological, art historical, iconographic, historical and landscape perspectives and recently it has been one of the central points of reference in heritage related discourses. The landscape context and provisional extent of the settlement formed around the Somapura Mahāvihāra have been shown in Fig. 1, 2 and 3. The cartographic representations overtly demonstrate that contrary to the established notions, the mahāvihāra was built in a landscape that was and still is, extremely dynamic with changing courses of rivers and depositional environment. The mahāvihāra was also not a single monument in the middle of nowhere disassociated from other settlements around.

The name of the village, according to oral history, derives from the lofty high mound which looked like a hillock or *pāhār* in the vast alluvial plain.

Excavations

Since the beginning of the 19th century the site attracted many antiquarians like Buchanan Hamilton,[2] Westmacott,[3] Alexander Cunninghum[4] and others. Cunninghum's endeavour to excavate the mound was prevented by the *zamindar* of Balihar, the owner of the land. Cunningham conducted limited excavation in a small part of the monastic area and at the top of the central mound only and unveiled the ruins of a square tower of 6.7 m side with a projection in the middle of each side. Afterwards the site was protected by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1919.

The regular archaeological excavation at the site was started in 1923. Initially it was a joint venture of Archaeological Survey of India, Varendra Research Society of Rajshahi and Calcutta University. In the first season the digging was concentrated to the south-western zone of the site where only a few cells facing east and north and their adjoining courtyards were exposed. R.D. Banerjee and his team resumed the work in 1925-26 on the northern zone of the central

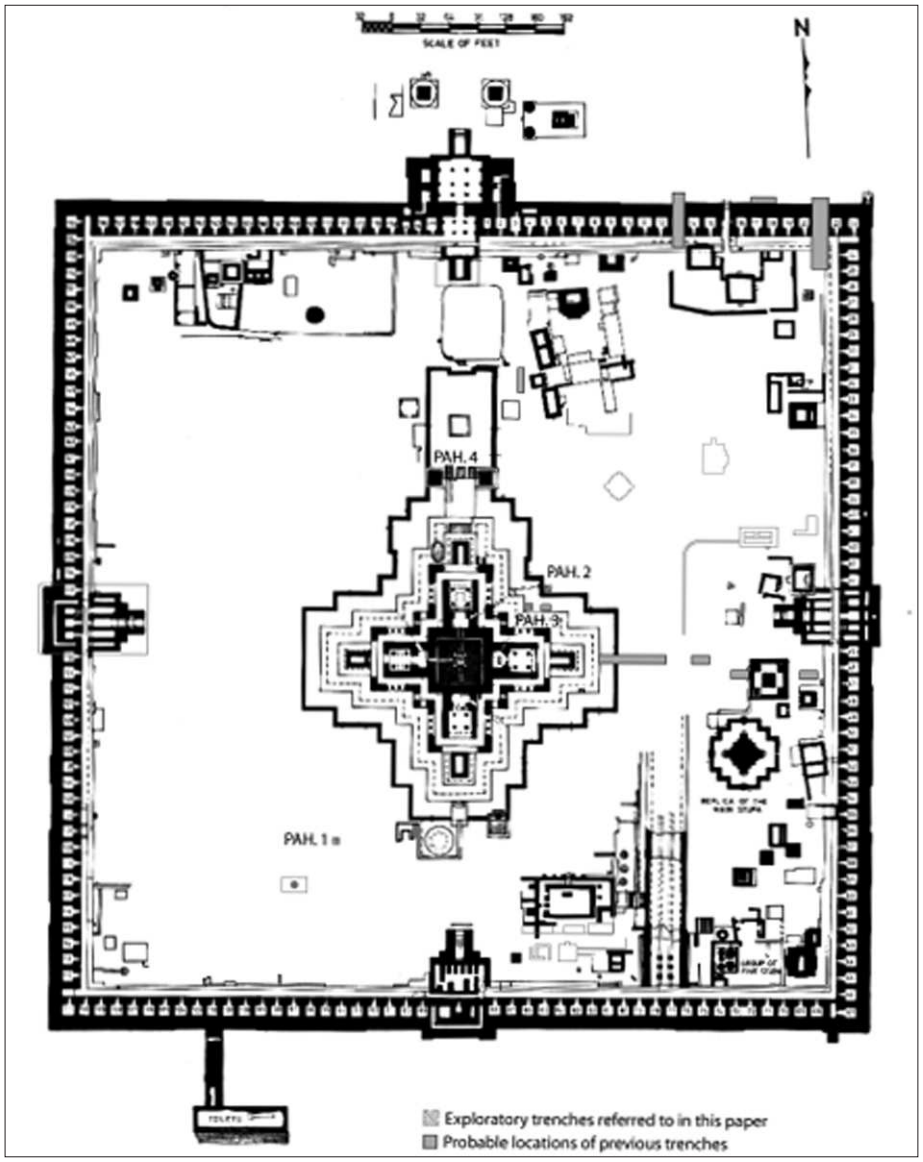


Fig. 3: Locations of trenches (Source: Sen et al. 2014).

mound. As a result the main staircase and the basement with terracotta plaques on the north, and the northern *maṇḍapa* with the ambulatory passage in front and general outline of a cruciform shrine facing north and the scheme of decoration were revealed for the first time. From the next season to 1934 the work in the other areas of the site including Satyapir Bhita was conducted every season by K.N. Dikshit, excepting 1930-32 when G.C. Chandra carried out the

excavation in the cells of the south-east side of the monastery and the adjoining courtyard. Thus the fabrics of the entire monastery in association with the temple and stūpa complex at Satyapir Bhita were unearthed.

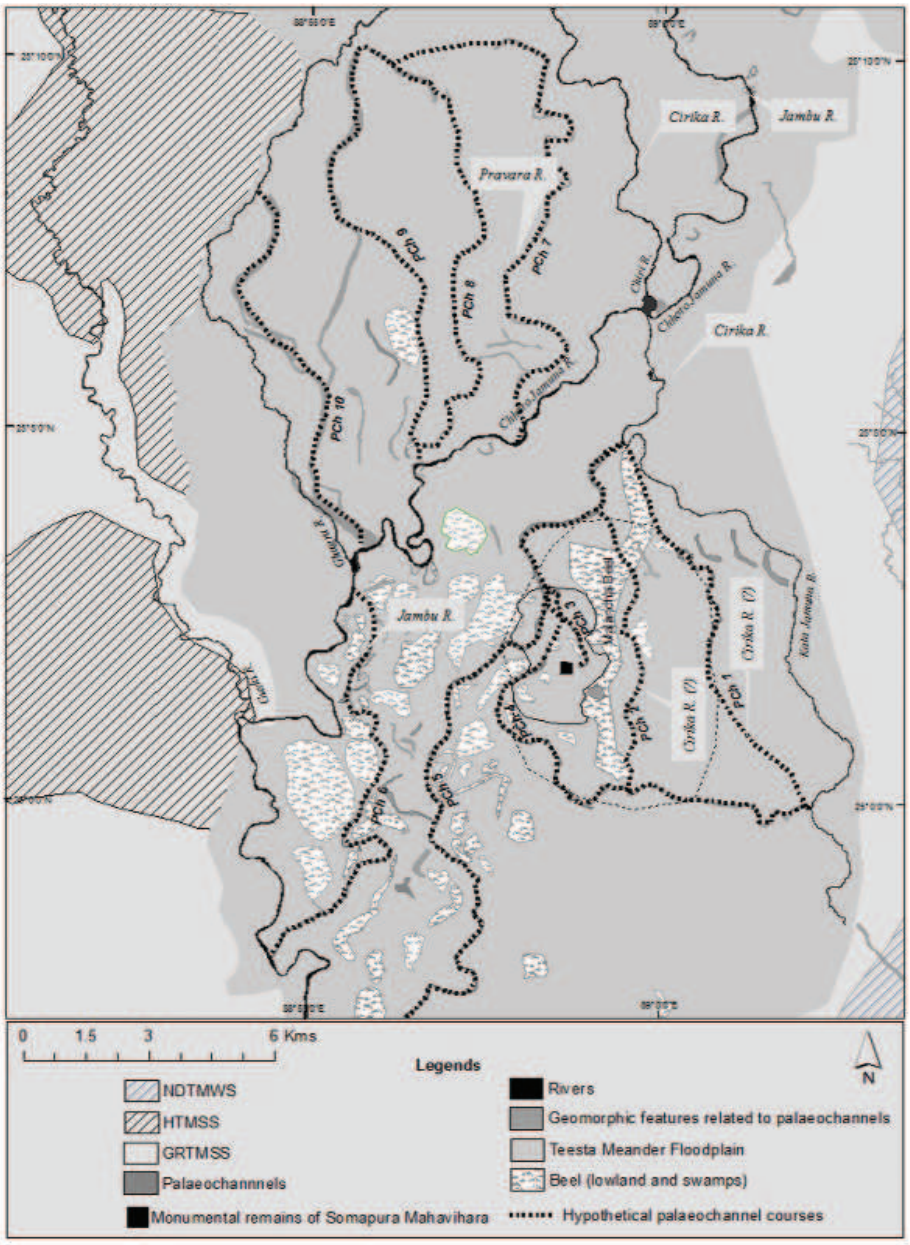


Fig. 4: The dynamic landscape context with the palaeochannel pattern of Somapura Mahāvihāra (Source: Sen et al. 2014).

To date, the excavation report by K.N. Dikshit contains the most exhaustive details of the remains. Several small scale excavations were conducted during subsequent periods without proper interpretations of stratigraphy. Earlier reports clearly suggested that the structural remains went through various periods of transformation and changes. There were no systematic attempts, however, to systematise the transformations, which are very important to address the history of monumental remains in their context. A few recent studies have tried to go beyond the predominant monument centric understanding of the structural and other remains by putting them in broader social, religious and landscape context (See for example, fig. 2 and 3).

The Structural Remains of the *mahāvihāra*

The excavated structural remains can be categorized into four components: 1. Rooms for the residence and worship of the monks (Fig. 5); 2. The central shrine (Fig. 6); 3. The toilets and other associated remains in the courtyard and outside the courtyard and 4. The temple and stupas of the adjacent place locally known as Satyapirer Bhita

Fig. 5: View of a wing of the mahāvihāra.

Epigraphic records suggest that there were three basic varieties of residential complex of Buddhist monks – *Mahāvihāra*, *Vihāra* and *Vihārikā*.[5] Although the basic difference between the first two lies in their size and composition, the nature of the third one is still to be identified with much evidential support. A few scholars have suggested that *vihārikā* could be confined only to nuns.[6] The layout of the monumental remains conforms to the basic design of the Buddhist *mahāvihāra/vihāra*, as has been noted by Debala Mitra.[7]

Fig. 6: Central Temple of the monumental remains of Somapura Mahāvihāra.

Cells with Associated Remains

Dikshit has provided a detailed description of the residential complex of Somapura Mahāvihāra which is a quadrangle measuring externally 302 m on each side. The descriptions here are a reproduction from his report.[8] The wings of four cardinal directions contain a total of 177 cells (excluding those in the central blocks), all neatly arranged round the square courtyard. A 2.7 m wide common verandah runs round the entire structure on the inner side.

In the middle of the northern wing stands the imposing gateway complex with pillared exterior hall, interior hall, strong rooms and staircases set in a grand front facade projecting outwards. There was a subsidiary gate on the same side in between the main gateway complex and the north-east corner. This monumental structure was balanced by special block in the rest three wings containing three cells with an ambulatory passage and a rectangular frontage, which ends in a staircase leading down to the courtyard (Fig. 7). These special cells apparently served as subsidiary shrines as suggested by their elaborate inner arrangements with ornamental brick pedestals.

The monastery shows the evidence of three floors. Of them the last one (upper) is traced at the depth of 30 cm, the second at 1 m, and the third (lowest) at about 1.5 m from the surface. It appears that this sequence has been generalised in all the cells of the monastery. According to Dikshit's report, the cells were used as living rooms by the monks, but at a later period at least 92 cells were converted

Fig. 7: View of the *caitya* and the wing of the Mahāvihāra.

into private worship or ceremonial chambers by providing each of them with a masonry pedestal in brick or stone.

Apart from the central shrine in the courtyard, there are many subsidiary structures which were built in different periods of occupation. The sequence of occupation and their relation to these structures cannot be understood because of the limitations of the excavation reports. Most of them are located in the eastern half of the courtyard. The important ones are a number of votive *stupa*s, a miniature replica of central shrine, five votive stupas *(Pañcavedī)*, kitchen and refectory, masonry drain and wells. The miniature model of the central shrine (16 m in length and breadth) is located on the south of the central block of the eastern wing. In this model the ground plan of the main temple with its triple projection between each of the cross is reproduced. The original construction of this model has been attributed to 10th-11th centuries CE.[9]

There exist some important structures enclosed within a wall that runs from the verandah against rooms 162 to 174 in the north-west part of the compound. In the western part of the enclosure, opposite cells 162 to 164, there are some structures which are marked off by a separate enclosure wall. A few rectangular weep-wholes are there at regular intervals in the enclosure wall to carry off water from the enclosure. The most important structure in this area is a brick built 'damp proof' foundation over which a room with verandah was built. There are a few stupas of different shapes around the central shrine. Most of these stupas, probably votive in nature, were built after the abandonment of the first circumambulatory passage.

Central Shrine

The shrine is located at the centre of the courtyard of the mahāvihāra. It is 21m high and covers 27 sq. m area. The layout of this shrine represents an important phase in the history of Buddhist religious architecture of South and South East Asia.

It was built on a cruciform plan that rises in three gradually diminishing terraces.[10] Of its three terraces above the ground level, the top one forming a massive 26 m square central block contains the deep shrine chamber, 4.5 m square. Nothing has survived above this level.[11] In the next terrace downwards, a broad projection containing an ante-chamber and pillared *maṇḍapa* (hall) has been added to the central block in the middle of each side, thus making the structure cruciform in shape. A 3 m wide circumambulatory passage runs round this as well as the next terrace. In the last two stages, *i.e.* in terrace one and the ground floor, the addition of another narrow projection in each arm of the cross makes the cruciform shape more elaborate with three projecting angles in each corner. The introduction of one more projection in the ground plan to accommodate the stairway landing in the northern arm makes the external shape of the temple more complex. Finally, a 1 m thick wall running parallel to the structure at a distance of 5.5 m encloses the entire temple area. The layout of the central shrine has been identified as *sarvatobhadra* by different scholars,[12] and the layout of the monastery with the shrine at its centre has also been identified to be symbolically representing *sarvadhātumandala*.[13]

Many scholars have concentrated their effort on understanding the architectural layout, decoration elements including terracotta plaques and stone sculptures, and developmental schemes of the architectural forms. The layout has close resemblance with the central shrine of the mahavihara at Antichak of Bihar which has been identified by the excavators as Vikramśīla Mahāvihāra and with several monasteries in Lalmai-Mainamati of Comilla. This architectural style has profoundly influenced the architecture of ancient Myanmar, Java and Combodia. The close connection between Bengal and the Archipelago in the early Pāla period, as evident from the Nalanda grant of Devapāla, obviously facilitated the exchange of such ideas and styles of architecture.

The basement wall of the temple is embellished with 63 stone sculptures, which were inserted at most angles of the projection and at intervals in specially built recesses in the middle of wall. Such recesses are more in number on the south-east and south-west sides than the northern side. These stone sculptures have been dated stylistically to 7th to 8th centuries CE. Except one image of Bodhisattva Padmapāni, all the sculptures are either Brahmanical or secular. The nature of these sculptures, their spatial patterning and origin has

generated great debate among scholars. Some of the scholars have identified their placement as irregular and brought from other establishments, while others have suggested that they were constructed for the purpose of decorating the Buddhist monument only. The presence of Brahmanical images and symbols in Buddhist monuments are very common in South Asia and their presence must not be viewed as an exception, they argue.[14]

Remains Outside the Monastic Boundary

Amongst the subsidiary buildings surrounding the monastery, the most notable are a lavatory complex approached from within the monastery by a long gangway, a bathing *ghāt*, Gandheśvarī Temple - all are in the southern side of the monastery, and the ruins of Satyapir Bhita, are located in the eastern side. The temple of Satyapir Bhita is taken to be the temple dedicated to Tārā referred to in the inscription of Vipulaśrīmitra. But this is questionable. The numerous stupas around this temple are not essentially votive in nature. Rather recent scholarship has indicated that they might have been śārīrika(?) in nature and are attestation of the mortuary practices among the Buddhists at that time.[15]

Recent Works on the Context and Sequence of Occupation

There were few excavations, fundamentally exploratory in nature, during the various phases, and most of these excavations are inadequately reported.[16] The stratigraphy and the transformations of the establishment through time and space were not elaborated in the proper contexts. One of the major aims of the post-liberation (1971) excavations was to deal with different problems of preservation and conservation.[17]

These excavations have yielded very significant results. Firstly, some additional information of the monastery has come to light. Secondly, the remains of an earlier phase of the monastery have been unearthed in lower level. Thirdly, the evidence of a pre-monastic establishment has been traced below the central temple and the monastery. It seems that the previous excavations (1923-1934) were confined to the late phase of the monastery only and the early phase was left untouched.

The narrow (30 cm wide) enclosure wall around the central shrine did not exist in the early phase of the temple. It was constructed in the beginning of the late phase over the accumulation of early phase.

Deep soundings in some cells have revealed the remains of earlier phase of the monastery below the late phase monastery. It appears that the dimension as well as the alignment of the back and front walls of the earlier

Fig. 8: Location of the trench (PAH. 4), Courtesy: Alam and Sultana 2013.

monastery was same as that of the later vihāra. The builders used this original monastery for quite some time.

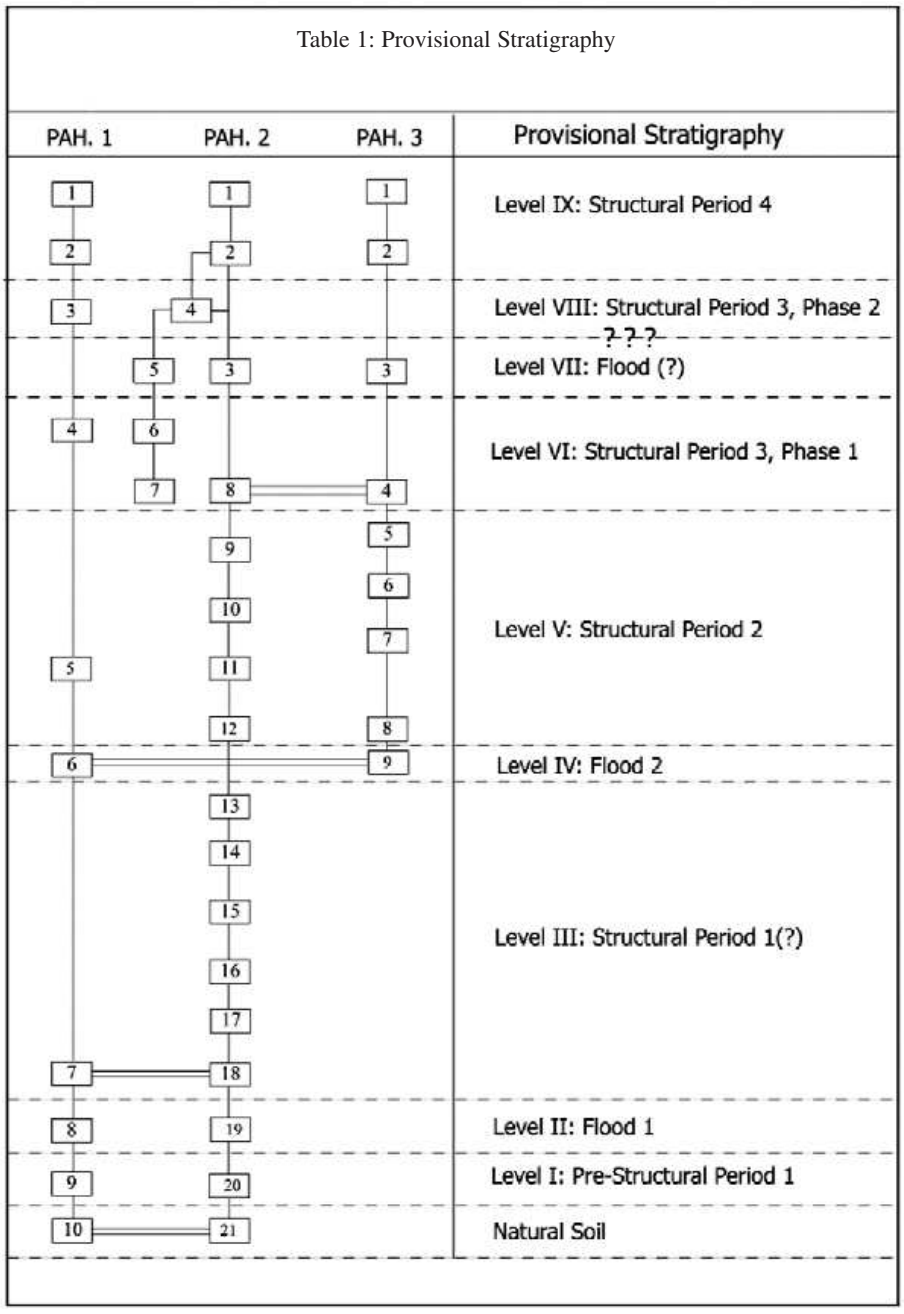
The findings above do not necessarily provide any understanding of the spatio-temporal sequence of the monastic establishment. On the basis of the exploratory trenches (Fig. 08) and their results provided by Alam and Sultana, Sen et al have proposed a provisional stratigraphy for the establishment for the first time (Table 1), though they asserted that the spatial coverage of the trenches is not representative of the entire establishment.

Level I: Pre-structural period 1: The traces of the first habitation on this location suggest that they were probably characterised by an occupation without the use of brick as a construction material.

Level II: Flood 1: Deposits of the first settlement were found to be buried under a deposit which represents a low to medium energy overbank flood born facies. This flood, possibly representing one event, might have destroyed the earliest habitations and buried the remains.

Level III: Structural Period 1(?): Occurrence of a few brick-fragments within the matrix of potsherds might well hint at some kind of activity pertaining to construction of a brick-built structure. The categorisation of this

Table 1: Provisional Stratigraphy



(Source: Sen et al. 2014).

period as structural is, therefore, very tentative and provisional. The main activity zone of the period was located in the area where PAH 2 (Fig. 9) was taken, that is, in the vicinity of the central shrine of the later *mahāvihāra*.

Fig. 9: Section of PAH. 2
[Courtesy: DoA, Ministry of Cultural Affairs].

Level IV: Flood 2: This second event of flood is recognisable through a deposit in trench PAH 1. This deposit constitutes medium to fine sand and complete ring stands, numerous in number. From a 30-40 cm thick sandy deposit in a 1 sq. m. area, more than 15 ring stands were recovered in PAH 1. As a particular type of pottery, ring stands are common from different archaeological sites of different periods. These ring stands were found to be clustered in a haphazard way without any particular organisation or orientation. It seems that they had been dumped before they were buried by the sediments from an episodic flood. As the sand of this deposit is homogeneous, massive and laid on the surface of the previous occupational deposit, possibly it might not have originated from anthropogenic activity. The deposit is identifiable in PAH 3 (layer 9), on which the first detectable and distinctive structural activity took place. Although this deposit is not recognisable in PAH 2, it is probable that the first structural occupation of the area was destroyed and buried by a flood event of a considerable intensity and strength. The reason for the absence of such deposit in PAH. 2 is probably later constructions which destroyed the earlier signatures. The slope of the deposit is towards the west.

Level V: Structural period 2: During the excavation in 2007-08, a portion of a cell of a brick-built structure was partially exposed along with associated floor (Fig. 10). The walls were found to be running beneath the present central shrine of the *mahāvihāra*. Alam has also reported this pre-central shrine structure. It would be relevant to note that Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw[18] has referred to the pre-monastic structures in earlier excavations. The central shrine was constructed over the remains of this earlier brick-built structure.

Fig. 10: Partially exposed cell underneath the present central temple
[Courtesy: Alam and Sultana 2013].

These particular pre-central shrine brick-built structures, and an earlier level of the monastic cells, have given rise to interesting debates regarding its nature and function. Earlier scholars[19] identified this structure as the Jain *vihāra* that has been referred to in the Paharpur copper plate inscription from the time of Budhagupta (c. 479 CE), and they dated the structure, to the 'Gupta' period. On the other hand, Alam and Sultana[20] think that these structural components were part of a Brahmanical temple with cellular construction and that the stone sculptures - the date, provenance and styles of which have stirred a long-lasting debate among scholars (see Lefèvre[21] and Asher[22] for a summary of the debate) – were possibly collected from this earlier edifice. The location of the Jain *vihāra* referred to in the copper plate inscription has not yet been determined, and even the primary provenance of the inscription that was recovered from the excavation of this site in 1927 has not yet been proved with any degree of certainty. Scholars like Asher[23] have put forward an alternative interpretation of the phrase 'Buddhist' that has been earlier inferred to denote 'Jain'. He also points to the fact that no Jain or Buddhist remains dating to 5th century CE have been identified at or in

the vicinity of Paharpur with a considerable degree of certainty. On the contrary, Furui has suggested that,

> The existence of the plate does not prove the presence of a Jain or other establishment at the present Paharpur, as a copper plate can be moved. I assume that the plate came to the *mahavihara* in a later period, when the *samgha* acquired rights over the land donated in the copper plate. We cannot know the exact location of the original establishment but can be sure it was in the Rajshahi-Naogaon area, as Dakshinanshaka-vithi is mentioned in the Jagadishpur plate I also.[24]

Wherever the location of the Jain *vihāra* might be, it could not be asserted that the structural remains underlying the present central shrine was a Jain *vihāra*. Simultaneously, the cellular nature of this pre-shrine structure cannot be determined through a structure that is only partially exposed.

Lefèvre,[25] by thoroughly dealing with the earlier arguments on the provenance of the stone sculptures, contended that the sculptures were not external and were basically part of an original iconographic scheme that, in his opinion, differed from those proposed by Asher[26] and Gail.[27] van Lohuizen-de Leeuw[28] has pointed to this pre-central shrine structure and, by refuting Dikhsit's argument in favour of a 'Jain Monastery', she opined that the earlier structure could be a Buddhist one. We have to remember that in the most elaborate excavation report to date, Dikshit[29] talked about various construction periods and levels of the monastery and the central shrine. His descriptions of different periods are very non-specific, and they cannot be related stratigraphically to each other in the absence of textual and graphic presentation, and interpretation of stratigraphy. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw[30] contended that it was possible to verify the three periods of occupation referred to by Dikshit.

In the report of the excavation of the early 1980s, van Lohuizen-de Leeuw[31] and Alam[32] referred to an earlier structural level that was identified within a confined area of the monastic cells under the Period I described by Dikhsit.[33] The stratigraphic relationships between this earliest level and the pre-central shrine level, or the levels of the central shrine, have not been demonstrated.

It is evident, however, that there was an imposing brick-built structure, the walls of which measured 2 meters in width at floor level, before the construction of the present central shrine. It could be postulated, on the basis of typological dating of the potshards from the earlier levels of excavation, that the date of this structure cannot be 5th century CE. We would like to propose a

much later date in the late 7th or early 8th century for this pre-central shrine structure on the basis of pottery from earlier levels. However, it must be said that a detailed study of the pottery is still awaited.

It is also not improbable that Dharmapāla built this monastery upon the ruins of, or by destroying, the earlier structure, the nature of which is unknown at this moment. On the other hand, Tāranātha refers to the building of this *mahāvihāra* by Devapāla (c. 810- 850 CE), son of Dharmapāla.[34] The accuracy and authenticity of the account of Tāranātha, who wrote his *History of Buddhism in India* about 800 years later, is questionable.[35]

Level VI: Earliest Period of Central Shrine and *Mahāvihāra*

We are proposing this period assuming that the wings with the cells of the *mahāvihāra* are contemporaneous to the central shrine. Dikhsit clearly referred to different construction periods above the second terrace of the main/central temple. In his words, 'the structures on the second terrace illustrate clearly the different periods at which the main temple underwent reconstruction or repair'.[36] He then goes on to a descriptive representation of different construction periods above the second terrace of the central temple, referring to four altogether.[37] We must note that Dikshit has not elaborated on different construction and occupational periods and phases in relation to the first terrace, except a few imprecise references to a few structures which were later or earlier. Moreover, he did not make any observation on their stratigraphic relationship.

Fig. 11: Bronze Budhha statue with the marks of heating, [Courtesy: DoA, Ministry of Cultural Affairs].

One of the most interesting pieces of evidence was found overlying the floor of this period. A layer (8 cm-10 cm) of dark grey ash and charcoal was found overlying the section facing the south and the east. This

layer of ash and charcoal provides evidence in support of a burning activity during or after this period. A broken bronze statue of Buddha (Fig. 11) found during the excavation in the early 1980s in one of the monastic cells bears the marks of burning. Presently displayed in the Paharpur site museum, the statue has greyish carbon coating on the surface and bulging marks along with cracks, and these signs attest to the fact that this sculptural piece was heated after its construction. Dikshit referred to the lumps of charcoal and ash from various parts of the excavated ruins. Besides, Dikshit[38] referred to scattered charcoal pieces from room 133, and he suggested that 'these were the charred remains of the rafters employed in the roof'. Heaps of charcoal and ashes in the dining hall have also been interpreted by him as the evidence of destruction by some conflagration.[39]

The epigraphic reference to the burning of Somapura Mahāvihāra and the death of Karuṇāśrīmitra in that attack could provide a clue to these deposits of ash and charcoal in both monastic cells and floor of central temple.[40] To establish the correspondence between the event referred to in the Stone Inscription of Vipulaśrīmitra and the event interpreted through archaeological evidence, it is necessary, first, to establish contemporaneity of these deposits in two locations through stratigraphic correlation; and secondly, to get a firm understanding about the chronological corroboration between the event described in epigraphic source and the event inferred from archaeological deposit.

Sircar[41] dated the inscription on palaeographic ground to c. 12th century CE, and Ray[42] thinks that the inscription was issued at the end of 11th century CE or in the first half of the 12th century CE. On the other hand, following Majumdar,[43] Dutt[44] postulates that the date of the inscription could be assigned to first half of the 12th century CE. He thinks that the event of setting fire to the monastery could be placed to about hundred years before the inscriptional record, that is, around the middle of the 11th century CE. Dutt speculates on the event in the following way:

> At that time a family migrating perhaps from the south, with the surname *Varman*, had set up a sort of kingdom in East Bengal (Vangal). The first king was named Jātavarma. He seems to have been inimical to Buddhism and tried to achieve notoriety by destroying the great monastery that was flourishing at Somapura in his time in northern Bengal. With this object, he sent troops who marched on the Dharmapāla Monastery and set fire to it.[45]

Ray[46] also relates this event to Jātavarma's antagonistic attitude towards Buddhism. Without referring to such speculative correlation between epigraphic

and historical narrative, which is based mainly upon the speculated non-patronizing and antagonistic attitudes of Varman rulers towards Buddhism as a whole, it could be claimed that the evidence of charcoal and ash provides firm support for an event of burning in the *mahāvihāra*. It is also evident that the deposit of charcoal and ash on the earliest floor of the main temple, nevertheless, cannot chronologically be the event of burning referred to in the stone inscription of Vipulasrimitra.

The floor most probably belongs to later part of the 8th century or the earlier part of the 9th century CE, if we accept that the temple was built simultaneously with present monastic establishments. The event of burning, then, must have taken place at that time or afterward. But the event cannot be chronologically placed to such a late date as the 11th century CE, considering the various periods of constructions and reconstructions of the main temple already referred to by Dikshit. The reconstruction activities have also been hinted at in the stone inscription of Vipulaśrīmitra, in which it says that the monk Vipulaśrīmitra had built a Tārā Temple at Somapura Mahāvihāra and patronised a good deal of masonry work in Somapura Mahāvihāra,[47] possibly as restoration and reconstruction after the second event of burning. The lumps of charcoal and ash in the monastic cell recovered by Dikhshit could be related to either of these two events of burning – one attested by stratigraphic evidence and another by epigraphic sources.

At the same time, Ray[48] pointed to the fact that Pratīhāra King Mahendrapāla extended his kingdom up to Paharpur during the reign of Nārāyanpāla (c. 861-917 CE). Dikshit[49] refers to the invasion of Pāla kingdom by Gurjara (?) emperor Bhoja I and Mahendrapāla in the last quarter of 9th century. One pillar inscription bearing the name of Mahendrapāla discovered from the excavation of Paharpur has been cited as evidence. The evidence can be falsified on the basis of discovery of the Jagjjivanpur copper plate inscription of Mahendrapāla, and through this inscription a new Pāla ruler has been identified bearing the name of Mahendrapāla.[50] It is highly probable that Mahendrapāla of the stone pillar inscription of Paharpur was this Pāla ruler Mahendrapāla. There is no possibility of imagining an attack or a donation from the Pratīhāra king at any moment of the occupational period of *Somapura Mahāvihāra.* The deposit of charcoal and ash, therefore, cannot be associated with the Pratīhāras.

Level VII: Flood (?): This level is highly propositional as it is only attested by a deposit. The deposit is 6 cm-8 cm thick silty sand that overlaid the floor and the deposit of charcoal and ash. Without confirming the deposit in

other areas of the monastic courtyard, its more generalised existence could not be verified. But the presence of this deposit lead us to propose that after the event of burning, a short-term sheet flood of low intensity affected the establishment.

Level VIII: Later periods of the main temple: We have already referred to the fact that Dikshit[51] had identified four construction periods above the second terrace of the central shrine. But it is not possible to correlate the levels identified by Dikshit with those we identified, owing to methodological disparity and modifications done by the later excavations, reconstructions, and restoration works. On the other hand, van Lohuizen-de Leeuw[52] has dated the three construction periods of the monastery suggested by Dikshit[53] to the end of 8th century, to the period between the late 10th and early 11th century, and to the period between the late 11th and early 12th century. She did not elaborate upon the parameters on the basis of which the dating was proposed, however. Hence, her dates cannot be correlated to the dates of various periods of the main temple.

Interestingly enough, one of the latest occupational levels of the establishment is attested by several structures around the main temple that were built on such locations which indicate the abandonment of the *pradakṣiṇapatha* of the first terrace, or on the ground level. Dikshit,[54] Lefèvre[55] and Alam and Sultana[56] have mentioned that the two square stupas on either side of the staircase of the main/central temple were constructed above the enclosure wall that determined the boundary of the ambulatory passage around the temple (Fig. 12). The excavation conducted by Alam and Sultana[57] confirms that. These two stupas, along with another temple and square stupa on the southern

Fig. 12: A stupa to the north of the entrance to the central temple on the *Pradakṣiṇapatha* closing the passage in the later period, [Courtesy: Alam and Sultana 2013].

enclosure wall, block the circumambulatory passageway, denoting that this passageway was not used as it had been in the earlier periods. That also makes it evident that the stone sculptures at the plinth were buried at some later period when the passageway was abandoned.

It is quite clear that there is a deposit of more than 1.5 m between this level and the level of the earliest floor. Without detailed excavation on each cardinal direction, it is not possible to detect the intermediate levels – that is, the levels corresponding to the entire occupational periods of the main temple; because of the modifications of deposits for the conservation and preservation works and poorly documented unsystematic excavations earlier, the extremely transformed deposits lack proper stratigraphic clues to the past. Yet, the reasons behind the raising of the ground level of the passageway and the courtyard are not clear. We think that raising the ground level by 1.5 m cannot only be explained in terms of the gradual loss of significance of Brahmanical sculptures on the plinth level, as hinted at by Lefèvre.[58]

Taking into account the landscape context and frequency of floods recognised through our understanding of stratigraphy, one possible hypothesis could be that to continue with the activities of the establishment in the face of frequent flooding and consequent poor drainage and waterlogging, the raising up of the ground level was essential.

Dikshit[59] found that the 'original' surface of the courtyard sloped gradually down from the southwest to the northeast. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw[60] has confirmed the slope in the earliest occupation level. Dikshit did not talk about any outlets draining the water out from the courtyard, except for a few inside the courtyard.[61] We are not sure about the existence of outlets or drains, even from the courtyard outside. Even the absence of any outlet does not necessarily prove that that the conditions for good drainage remained the same throughout the occupational periods at the *mahāvihāra.*

What previous scholars, and consultants hired to solve the present waterlogging problem at Paharpur, have missed is the landscape setting on which the *mahāvihāra* establishment is located. They tried to solve the problem only in terms of the present courtyard. What we would like to propose here is certainly a hypothesis based on our geoarchaeological investigations outside the *mahāvihāra*. The stratigraphy in this paper also supports the proposition. The gradual vertical accretion of flood borne sediments both inside and outside the establishment, especially in relation to the gradual subsidence of the floodplain, in the pre-structural and structural periods is

recognisable. The vertical accretion of the floodplain and contemporaneous dynamic lateral migrations of rivers from the east to west made it impossible to drain out the water from the courtyard. It was, therefore, necessary to raise the ground level of the courtyard.

Though we are skeptical about the possibility of retrieving the stratigraphic succession after the construction of the main temple, extensive excavation could be recommended around the main temple to get an idea of the succession of occupation before the construction of the main temple.

Level IX: Post Excavation Deposits and Deposits, Fillings and Masonries of Conservation and Restoration Activities:

This level includes masonry works, deposits and cuts of the post-excavation period that began in early 1920s. After the inclusion of the monuments as a world heritage site, many activities of excavation and relocation of deposits took place, specifically in the courtyard for solving the waterlogging problem. Most of the walls were completely taken out and have been rebuilt for the restoration work. The pits dug for these purposes and the re-filled deposits are included in this period.

Concluding Remarks

On the basis of above enumerations, the following points could be made as concluding observations:

One: The established notion of some scholars that Somapura Mahāvihāra was a single monastery has been proved wrong by the studies of Sen and also, by the attestation from the Indian Museum Copper Plate of Dharmapāla in which there is reference to a *vihāra* and *vihārikā* built by Mahāsāmanta Bhadranāga in the vicinity of *Somapura Mahāvihāra*.[62] It is also possible to hypothesise on the the identification of the present courses of rivers with those mentioned in the copper plate inscription as has been proposed by the present scholar.[63]

Two: The widely normalised perception of Buddhist monasteries as the centre of learning and meditation has been questioned. In different parts of South Asia Buddhist monasteries played many social, political, economic and even, therapeutic role. In the context of Bengal, these monastic establishments had crucial part to play in agrarian expansion and trade. They had hierarchical networks with the hinterland zones on the one hand and with other monastic establishments on the other. The remains of a few interesting structural

remains which were possibly used to store crops (Fig. 13) along with attestation from textual sources indicate that the *saṃgha* had a greater role to play in agrarian sector.

Fig. 13: Structural remains in the courtyard of the mahāvihāra remains identified as the storage of crops.

Three: The notion that Buddhist monasteries were located in secluded space for facilitating meditative and esoteric practice of the renunciant monks is also erroneous. On the contrary, these monastic establishments had turned into the core around which the settlements in that period formed and transformed.

Four: The Somapura Mahāvihāra was an establishment with a continuous history as far as the sequence suggests. The transformations of the earlier establishments, and their destruction or abandonment were partly influenced by the floods and shifting of the rivers in the vicinity in a very dynamic alluvial context.

Five: This monastery was not destroyed by the Turks. Rather, before the coming of the Turks in Bengal, the monastery was attacked and destroyed at least twice, as far as the archaeological and epigraphic data suggest. On the basis of careful examination of the archaeological data, it also seems that the monastic establishment was not abandoned as a consequence of a catastrophic event, both natural and cultural. Rather, the transformations of cells, the construction of a

few structural remains possibly after 13th century CE and continuation of occupation in some pockets or spaces suggest that the monastic establishment continued, albeit at a declining state even after 13th century CE.

Notes and References

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